

Impact of Cultural Collisions in Khalid Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*

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Abstract

This paper tries to examine the interface of Western and Indian sub-continental cultures and the impact of cultural collisions in Khalid Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*. This novel has been analyzed and investigated from the perspective of cultural collision and cultural wars. Interestingly, Hosseini has experienced the traumas of the imperialistic forces. He lived in different political environment but all experienced and witnessed an upsurge of cross cultural fertilization of societies which resulted into untold miseries of the people. The main focus has been on the themes of cultural dislocation, plight of men and women who are forced to leave their homes because of the imperialistic hostile policies of the colonizers. The loss of identity is a major factor in the protagonist of Hosseini. This paper has explored the various socio-economic forces which brought about tremendous changes in the cultural outlook. The rise of militancy in Afghanistan, the growth of patriarchal oppression, and the policy of liberalism, the galore of media and television industry are some of the factors that led to the growth of cultural collision.

Keywords: Culture, Environment, Dislocation, Identity and Oppression**Impact of Cultural Collisions in Khalid Hosseini's *The Kite Runner***

In the post-colonial fiction of Khalid Hosseini the main focus is on the theme of the cultural clash of the immigrants living in America. The immigrants leave their homeland and carry

with them the rituals, customs and traditions of their original culture. But as they live in the host country they are confronted with so many challenges during their stay. The immigrants are confronted with the reality that they are different from the local people by having different name, colour, appearance, culture, and ethnicity. Hosseini is an Afghani immigrant who came from Kabul with his wife Saroya and father, Baba. His ambition was to become an established writer. He started his life from California since his hometown, Kabul is in turmoil. Hosseini's main purpose is to expose the political instability, anarchy and terrorism experienced by people of Afghanistan. The history of Afghanistan is marked by death and destruction particularly during the last thirty years of prolonged war, infrastructure collapse, and restrictive political regimes. The situation of women in Afghanistan has been dismal during this period. Their status was undermined during the Soviet occupation and under subsequent regimes.

The novel, *The Kite Runner* (2003), made Hosseini as an international celebrity. Hosseini's prime concern is to depict the conflict between good and evil, innocence and betrayal of the protagonists. The main strength of the novel is cultural collision and its destructive impact on the psyche of the characters. The people of Kabul are forced to leave their homes as the Taliban capture power and destroy all institutions. The evil forces represented by Assef wreck the life of Hassan and Amir who migrates to America. He is caught in the trap of alien and native culture. Amir has to go back to Kabul to save the life of Hassan. His journey to Kabul is packed with the episodes of pain, shock and dislocation. Hosseini's description recreates the intense disorientation and terror of experience. The novel begins in Afghanistan and Amir's journey is fraught with danger and uncertainty.

Hosseini has covered the entire history of Afghanistan in a dramatic way depicting the internal cultural conflicts confronted by all the protagonists. Hosseini has reported all important phases of Afghan history and culture. Hosseini is much interested in the political events but he vividly portrays the social condition of the people during the Afghan conflicts.

The story of the novel becomes the representation of Afghan life and culture. The plot of the novel unfolds the impact of conflicts and the various phases of cultural collision. The Afghan conflicts brought untold miseries to people. People of Kabul witnessed rapes, sexual oppression of women. Afghan conflicts resulted into the traumatic experiences as people were tortured and killed. The worst happened when people started fleeing from Kabul. This set in the process of cultural corrosion and the beginning of the inner trauma of the people. Their journey from Kabul to America via Pakistan result into pain and privation. They suffer alienation and homelessness because of dislocation. Andrew Edgar and Peter Sedgwick in *Cultural Theory the Key Concepts* observe thus explaining the meaning of cultural identity:

The issue of cultural identity is central to cultural studies, in so far as cultural studies examines the contexts within which and through which both individuals and group construct, negotiate and defend their identity or self-understanding. (183)

In “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” Stuart Hall defines

cultural identity in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective one true self, hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificial imposed selves, which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. It is called as identity as being which offers a sense of unity and commonality. (51)

The Kite Runner primarily focuses on three significant periods in Amir’s life: his Kabul childhood. Amir is the son of a rich merchant; he lives in Wazir Akbar Khan in Kabul. Amir looks superior even in appearance. Amir has a thin-boned frame, a shaved head, and low set ears. Amir had “a thin-boned frame, a shaved head, and low-set ears” (22). His face shows that he is a true Afghan. His mother Sofia Akrami died after giving birth to him. Father-son relationship are estranged because Amir hates Baba who forces him to be a real man like the Afghan boys who likes playing soccer and kite, hunting and fighting. Baba watched Amir crying when a horseman fell on the ground and died. At the outset of the chapter it is very

important to know the history and geographical location of Afghanistan in brief because all the major events in *The Kite Runner* occurred in Kabul. Afghanistan is a culturally mixed nation, a crossroads between the East and the West. The country has been a gateway of trade and migration since antiquity. The geographical location of this small country is very significant connecting her with South Asia, Central Asia, and Southwest Asia. Afghanistan became a buffer state as the British and Russians tried to establish their hegemony. However, the third Anglo-Afghan War resulted into full independence.

The plot of the novel, *The Kite Runner*, presents the social life of Afghan people in the Soviet ruled government, the scenes of Afghan civil war are vividly recorded. All important phases of Afghan history and culture are well reported by Hosseini. The title of novel, *The Kite Runner* means someone who runs to catch a kite. *The Kite Runner* is the source of struggle among Amir and Hassan as a trophy of honour. It is a symbol of victory for the Afghan boys in Afghanistan. Hosseini focused on the life of the people of Afghanistan when the Taliban captured power and started gun culture in the county destroyed all institutions. Evil forces brought violence and anarchy in the country. Hosseini made the novel interesting by interspersing the theme of sin and redemption and the loss of innocence of children in the various episodes of the plot. The title of the novel is based on the cultural events of Kabul since the kite flying is celebrated as a national festival there. It is a pride for the family if someone wins the competition Hosseini has started the novel with Amir-Baba relationship. Baba belongs to the royal family; he is greatly respected in Kabul and is a successful businessman. He married a rich woman who belonged to a royal blood. He is a true Pashtun with tall muscular body and courage. He once fought with a bear and everyone in the family and society he enjoys admirable reputation. Baba has a poor opinion about his son Amir who is given to writing poetry and reading. The novel gives a clash of different ethnic groups. Baba personifies all the typical qualities of Pashtun tribe; he is aggressive, bold, and dominating. *The Kite Runner* is about Amir and Hassan who live in the same house;

Amir belongs to an upper class since his father married to a royal princess and Hassan is a Hazara looked down upon by the people of Kabul. Hassan is a son of Ali who is a kind and noble person. Baba slept with his wife Sanaubar who gave birth to Hassan but Ali remained faithful to Baba. Ali is a good singer; Amir always praises his melodious voice. Ali helps Baba to export carpets and is his business associate. Hosseini portrays Ali thus:

Ali had congenital paralysis of his lower face muscles, a condition that rendered him unable to smile and left him perpetually grimfaced. ...but polio had left Ali with a twisted, atrophied right leg that was sallow skin over bone with little in between except a paper-thin layer of muscle. (23)

Amir and Hassan live like brothers and are emotionally attached with the other. Baba and Ali were friends in spite of their ethnic differences. Amir played with Hassan; enjoyed the kite flying and cycling together but he never compromised with his self respect and elite status. Amir spent his “first twelve years of his life playing with Hassan; enjoying “hide-and seek, cops and robbers, cowboys and Indians” (22). Hassan remained illiterate but Amir used to narrate stories and recited poems to give him practical knowledge. Amir is sensitive; a book worm and of had aesthetic tastes. He aspired to be a writer in his life. Baba did not have good opinion about Amir. He is not a Muslim fanatic as he disregarded Mullah Fatiullah who preached orthodox ideas. Interestingly, Hassan and Amir have lost their mothers and the novel is focused on fathers and sons. Amir-Hassan relationships form the main nucleus of the novel. Amir came under the influence of his mother as he aspired to be a writer. The main reason why Amir does not like his father is his jealousy of Hassan because Hassan steals Baba’s attention and affection to him. In this case Hassan is not his friend but just his Hazara servant that gets more love and affection from his Baba than him.

The rape of Hassan in the alley of by Assef is a major event in the novel. Hosseini describes the entire episode in the seventh chapter of the novel. Amir won the kite tournament to please Baba who had a poor opinion about Amir. It was a great day for Amir

who struggled hard to win the tournament. Hassan leaves Amir to get the blue kite back to him. He is trapped in an alley by Assef who is jealous of Amir and rapes Hassan with his friends Kamal and Wali. The entire scene of the rape of Hassan is described by Hosseini in a heart rending language:

Aseef knelt behind Hassan, put his hands on Hassan's hips and lifted his bare buttocks. He kept one hand on Hassan's back and undid his own belt buckle with his free hand. He unzipped his jeans; dropped his underwear. He positioned himself behind Hassan. Hassan didn't struggle. Didn't even whimper. (66)

Assef has demanded the blue kite but he told him that he had captured this wonderful kite for Amir. Hassan is raped just for a kite by Assef who is a villain in the novel representing evil forces. Amir saves could have saved Hassan from the clutches of cruel Assef but on that day he exhibited his cowardice and remained as a silent spectator watching the cruel deed of Assef from a distance. Amir does not help Hassan because he is in an agreement with his friend who hates Hazaras and an agent of sexual harassment that nothing is free in the world. Amir becomes sinful and guilty because of his betrayal to Hassan. He silently witnessed the rape scene and did nothing to save Hassan. He enjoys good reputation in Kabul and his father is a big gun Aseef could not have dared to molest Hassan if Amir had intervened. But on that day Hassan was more a Hazara to him than his fast friend. Amir was always haunted by his metaphysical guilt; he could not face the presence of Hassan. He decided to get rid of him; he put his gold watch and money under the mattress of Hassan and complained to Baba of theft. Baba hates stealing as he believed theft to be the greatest sin of life. He took this decision but it accumulated his sins, as he says: Baba hates the act of stealing as he advises to Amir.

Baba is very much upset when he recovered money and gold watch from the bed of Hassan. Ali is also very much disturbed and he decides to leave Baba and Amir forever. Hassan left Amir's house accepting his crime before Amir who had planned everything just

to throw him out to hide his guilt. Hassan knew everything but he became a lamb to be butchered by Amir. Hassan is further separated after the fall of the Afghanistan monarchy and the Soviet invasion. Amir immigrates to America with his father, and they struggle to integrate into American society. The novel has a cyclical structure; it begins with Amir's life in America and ends with his life in Kabul. Hosseini has used the technique of stream of consciousness as the plot shuttles between past and the present. In the early life Hosseini describes Amir-Hassan relationship and the marginalization of the Hazaras by the Pashtun tribe. The theme of cultural collision begins with the description of Hassan and his friendship with Amir. Hassan and Amir were like brothers as Hassan's mother has milked Amir from her breasts. Amir lost his mother at the early age and he is nurtured by Hassan's mother.

Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* presents new ideas depicting complexity of conflict toward human relationship and other conflicts that happen in the life of the immigrants while living in war-torn Baba and Amir decide to leave Kabul because of the cruelties of the Taliban. Hosseini has described the scenes of exodus of people after the Taliban captured power in the most touching language. The Taliban destroys all the institutions and disrupted the value system of Kabul. The gun culture started; people daily witnessed the savage cruelties of the Taliban, Aseef gained power and he started bullying and killing people just for fun. Baba and Amir decided to leave Kabul in quest for peace and stability. Amir begins his journey from Kabul and reaches Pakistan with Baba where he stays six months to complete his visa formalities to go to America. His long journey is loaded with the harrowing experiences of anguish, dislocation, and homelessness. Hosseini gives the metaphor of river in this section of the novel to depict the inner turmoil in the heart of Amir. The water of the river always goes forward; it never goes backward. Amir also wants to forget his past life and the sin that he committed in betraying Hassan. Hosseini's description recreates the intense disorientation and terror of experience.

The cultural clash in *The Kite Runner* becomes meaningful; Amir's American identity

gives him courage and power to confront Assef to defeat the forces of evil. But Amir endures all the traumas of life. Amir and his father immigrate to America and this cultural change is seen in the shift in relationships formed. They settle in California, in an area called “Little Kabul.” They desperately struggle to recreate their home land in their new space but the memories of their homeland haunt them. Sohrab is a symbol of innocence in the novel. He is an important character in *The Kite Runner* who becomes a victim of cultural corrosion. He experiences pain and sorrow no boy would ever want to experience. Sohrab’s experiences with physical and sexual abuse depict his traumatic experiences through the changes of the character before, during, and after to develop the theme of lost innocence. Before the sexual abuse, Sohrab lived a happy life. He loves kite running, enjoyed freedom, and innocence. His father, Hassan, would hang the kites they have captured like paintings. Amir is always haunted by his guilt. He discovers that Hassan is his half brother as Baba has made Hassan’s mother pregnant. Baba’s sexual relationship with Hassan’s mother accentuates his guilt as he felt sorry for Hassan. Hosseini “memory” and “discovery” are the main tools to depict the metaphysical guilt of Amir and the themes of displacement and fragmented identities in *The Kite Runner*. Amir is guilty and so is guilty his father, the psychological trajectories are depicted vividly.

Conclusion

To conclude, *The Kite Runner* reflects condition of Afghanistan society that becomes major issues such as discrimination, racialism, and identity. Amir and Hassan story of the novel depicts the personal problems of Amir, his struggle and courage to atone for the sins of the past. But on the higher level, Hosseini depicts the real corrosion of culture when Amir is involved in the battle with Assef. Afghanistan is ethnically a very diverse country, namely Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, Aimaq, Turkmen, Baluch, and other small group. In this story, the main characters who undergone those conflicts come from a Pashtun and a Hazara ethnic. The Pashtun as an ethnic group has all the positive qualities, they enjoy high status in

Kabul, Pashtuns are highly respectable rich and successful. On the contrary, Hazara has negative qualities, low status; poor, physically unattractive engaged in low jobs. Most of Hazaras are waiters, servants, and beggars. In this case, the different backgrounds in both of them appear the issues of cultural identity which Amir also keeps his cultural identity until he lives in America. Amir also suffers from diasporic agony while living in America. He tries to apply his native Pashtun culture in his host country, in his family like Baba and desperately struggles to maintain his cultural identity even in America. His hybrid identity becomes a reality because of his diasporic experiences and cultural corrosion. Diaspora identities are those which are always producing and reproducing themselves a new through transformation and difference. It means that immigrants in the host country stick with their culture and try to develop through transformation constantly.

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